

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

Staff
Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners
Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Natasha Sierra

Meeting Minutes
April 22, 2021
Via GoTo Meeting Webinar
Online Video Platform
04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:20 pm.

Attending: FHC members Claudia DeAndrade, Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman and Natasha Sierra; City staff, Bryant Gaspard.

Minute distribution (upon acceptance) to: FHC members and others attending; also posted to City website.

I. Standing Agenda Items

Meeting Minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes from the March 25, 2021 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously *approved* by roll call vote.

Facebook page update: One of the Facebook posts that Dennis discussed was the question of the week, “How much notice do I (tenant) have to give before moving out?” The answer is dependent on if you have a lease or you are a tenant-at-will (no lease). If you are a tenant-at-will, you must generally give at least 30 days notice. If you have a lease, you are bound to stay for the length of the lease unless you and your landlord can come to a mutual agreement when to end it.

The other Facebook post that received quite a bit of engagement was about the City of Reynoldsburg in Ohio adding “source of income” as a protected class under its fair housing law. The City Council of Reynoldsburg on March 22, 2021 voted 6-1 to add source of income as a protected class under unlawful discriminatory housing practices.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no housing discrimination complaints received in April. However, April is recognized as Fair Housing Month and it is the 53rd Anniversary of the Fair Housing Act.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant informed the Commissioners that the Know Your Rights-Fair Housing presentation was held virtually and went well. Rona presented at the webinar and spoke about the role of a real estate agent and how a prospective renter should communicate with them and Bryant spoke about the basics of

fair housing law. Lee Erica Palmer, an Attorney at Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services also presented at the webinar that was hosted by Nicole Eigbrett, the Director of Community Organizing at the Community Action Agency of Somerville. Bryant shared that the presentation was recorded and will be uploaded to the City's YouTube page and shared on the Commission's Facebook page. Rona added that we can re-purpose the video presentation in the future for other events.

Bryant informed the Commissioners that he spoke at a recent meeting of the Commission for Persons with Disabilities about the work and role of the Fair Housing Commission. At the meeting Bryant shared some information about fair housing law and how to submit a fair housing complaint. He also went over some of the major points of the FY'20 Fair Housing Commission Annual report. One of the main points of feedback Bryant received from the Commission members was trying to make the process of filing a housing discrimination complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) easier. Rona added that the location of MCAD's office in Boston is not easy to get to if you are physically disabled. Natasha concurred with Rona and added that some people may be intimidated if they have to go to Boston to file a complaint. Bryant shared that there is an option for a person to call, email or mail a complaint to the MCAD office.

In regards to the FY'20 Fair Housing Commission Annual report, Bryant also informed the Commissioners that he will likely be speaking in May with the members of the Housing and Community Development Committee (H&CD) (standing committee of the Somerville City Council). The presentation was supposed to happen in April, but that did not occur. He invited members of the Commission to attend the Committee meeting and offer their own thoughts on the report and the work the Commission engages in. Some of the Commissioners had previously attended a H&CD meeting to discuss the need to amend the fair housing ordinance as it relates to the composition and qualifications of the Commissioners.

Bryant shared a recent article that the federal government will be reviewing two fair housing laws that were repealed under the previous administration. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development submitted two fair housing rules for review. One is the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule, which requires local governments that accept federal housing dollars to review their policies and actively work toward reversing segregation. The other is the discriminatory effects standard, better known as the disparate impact rule, which bars seemingly neutral policies in lending, renting and selling that result in discrimination. Bryant added that he hopes the repeal for both laws can be reversed as soon as possible since the current administration has shared that addressing housing discrimination is an important part of their work.

Lastly, Patrice and Dennis shared that the Commissioners are working on a candidate questionnaire to be answered by anyone running for public office in Somerville. Elections for Mayor and City Council will occur in September 2021 and they shared that it was important to solicit feedback from the candidates regarding the position and stance on fair housing. Patrice and Dennis are serving as Co-Chairs of this questionnaire project. The questionnaire will ask the candidates six questions related to fair housing to get a better understanding of their knowledge and experience on the issue. The intent of the questionnaire is to inform voters about each candidate's views on fair housing and affordable housing.

Dennis reminded everyone that the Commission is a non-partisan body that does not endorse candidates for public office. Claudia likes the idea of the questionnaire since it will help voters make a more informed decision especially since the City will have a new Mayor in 2022. Dennis shared that he will email a draft of the questionnaire to everyone via google documents and anyone can make edits and/or provide suggestions.

III. Announcements

There were no announcements.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis Fischman and seconded by Rona Fischman and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 5:25 pm.